

Key Changes to the Ambient Air Quality Measure agreed by Ministers April 2021.

Background

The National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure (AAQ NEPM) requires participating jurisdictions to undertake monitoring, evaluation and reporting activities that allow communities to understand their local air quality and assist the formulation of air quality policies.

The AAQ NEPM was last varied in 2015 to make changes to the particle standards.

Ministers signalled their intent to vary the AAQ NEPM ozone (O₃), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and sulfur dioxide (SO₂) standards in late 2018.

Following public consultation Ministers have agreed to several changes to the AAQ NEPM including to:

Standards

- establish an O₃ standard with an 8-hour averaging period that reflects the health evidence and its use internationally, with a numerical value of 65 ppb.
- significantly strengthen NO₂ reporting standards for 1-hour and annual average NO₂ to 80 ppb and 15 ppb respectively, bringing forward standards initially proposed for 2025. This will make them tighter than the World Health Organization guidelines. This reflects the most recent health evidence emerging about the health impacts of NO₂.
- significantly strengthen SO₂ reporting standards for 1-hour and 24-hour SO₂ to 100 ppb and 20 ppb respectively to make them some of the tightest in the world. The 1-hour SO₂ standard will be strengthened again in 2025 to 75 ppb.
- remove annual SO₂ and 1-hour and 4-hour O₃ averaging periods to align the standards with the recent health evidence and for consistency with many international agencies.
- change the form of the standards to the maximum value with no allowable exceedances providing the most transparency for reporting purposes.
- apply the existing exceptional events rule that applies to the particle standards to O₃ given the linkages between elevated O₃ levels and fire events. This rule is used by jurisdictions to determine compliance with the standards.
- extend annual reporting of population exposure from particles as PM_{2.5} to O₃ and NO₂ given the widespread exposure across whole populations.

Desired environmental outcome

- alter the desired environmental outcome (DEO) of the AAQ NEPM to focus on minimising health risks associated with air pollution exposure. The final DEO confirms the intention of the AAQ NEPM to monitor at sites that provide an indication of the air quality experienced by people generally in a region, rather than focusing on specific significant pollution sources, which will continue to be monitored and assessed through state-based air quality management frameworks.

Number of AAQ NEPM monitoring stations

- change how the number of AAQ NEPM monitoring stations required is determined in a region so that jurisdictions primarily consider the potential population at risk ahead of the population size

Future reviews

Ministers also agreed to commence a further review of the O₃, NO₂ and SO₂ standards in 2025 noting that reviews of the PM_{2.5} and annual PM₁₀ particle standards are also planned. This will provide an opportunity to review the standards in line with the available evidence at that time, including any updates to the World Health Organization guidelines.

Application of the AAQ NEPM

Ministers also note a significant concern raised by industry and business groups during consultation was how the AAQ NEPM standards are applied in states and territories. The standards in the AAQ NEPM are not intended to be applied as an environmental standard by regulators without consideration of regulatory impacts in their jurisdictions. The Explanatory Statement clarifies this intent of the NEPM as a standard for reporting representative ambient air quality within an airshed, and not as a regulatory standard. The AAQ NEPM does not constrain a jurisdiction's ability to manage local or regional air quality issues.

In making these decisions, Ministers considered the views of the many submissions and used a weight-of-evidence approach that considered a range of factors including the protection of health and alignment with the prevailing health evidence, the ability of jurisdictions to achieve the standards and the availability and efficiency of abatement measures to lower concentrations. Ministers also considered that for many of the pollutants there is no identified threshold below which adverse health effects are not observed which means there will be health benefits in continuing to pursue concentrations below the standards.